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Teachers' and Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of the Use of the Internet to Study English

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out teachers' and undergraduate students' perception of the importance of using the Internet to study English. This was measured through the use of questionnaires distributed to 10 teachers and 100 students; and interviews conducted with 5 teachers and 20 students. Based on the findings, it was concluded that in learning English, students need interactions with their teachers and friends. To facilitate the interactions, the Internet, particularly the websites designed for learning English is a good alternative. However, it should not be the only instrument used to improve the learners' language proficiency. Numerous strategies teachers can choose to implement it are also recommended.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), computer, Internet, teachers' and students' perceptions

Introduction

CALL stands for Computer-Assisted Language Learning. It is the latest in the series of modern aids to language learning; an important innovation in the use of computers as part of a language course. CALL does not refer to the use of a computer by a teacher to type out a worksheet, payment receipt, etc.

According to Hardisty and Windeatt (1989, p. 8), computers can be effective in language classrooms because they are different from other media. This is because they allow users to carry out tasks which are impossible in other media (such as automatically providing feedback on certain kinds of exercise) and carry out tasks much more conveniently than in other media (such as editing a piece of writing by deleting, moving and inserting text)

Scholars claim that students will usually gain more from these activities. As Jones (2001, p. 360) observes, “the use of computers, like other self-access activities, tends to be regarded as promoting independent learning, and thus autonomy-highly valued goal in this age of the communicative approach”. As a result, students are claimed to be more motivated to learn the target language.

The use of the internet which is defined as a global system of interconnected computer networks is encouraged in CALL classrooms. Crystal (2002, p. 235) supports the use of the Internet as a means of “putting learners in contact with up-to-date information about language”. He says that the Internet “can provide a great variety of materials, attractively packaged, such as newspaper articles, quizzes, exercise, self-assessment tasks, and other forms” (p. 233). Thus, it can be said that the Internet is a very valuable resource for teaching.

Many studies indeed have been conducted and found that the Internet provides a huge potential in learning and teaching. Leuthold (1998), for example, in his research reported that 65% of the subjects, i.e. students taking subjects introductory economics, said that the Internet helped them understand the concepts. Jones and Madden (2002) also found similar evidence. 80% of the students who became their subjects reported that Internet use had a positive effect on their academic experience. A study conducted by Embi et al (2002, pp. 49-50) at the *Universiti Putra Malaysia* (UPM), also showed that many language teachers and students confirmed these benefits as many of them said that in general, they found EFL websites provided learners with an innovative and creative way of learning, provided teachers with useful materials, and thus made learning and teaching more fun.

Based on literature review, the writer concluded that there were some of the advantages offered by the Internet, namely variability, convenience, and interactivity. The Internet provides a huge amount of various materials. To this, Teeler and Gray (2000, p. 36) state that one of the characteristics of the Internet is topicality. Much of the content of the Internet is updated on a regular basis.

In addition, many new publications unavailable in print are being published virtually. The topics offered then are more various, interesting and up-to-date. In addition, the language used is real, not especially designed for textbooks, thus it encourages real language acquisition (Raines 1983, as cited in Graus, 1999, p. 3). The Internet clearly improves the connection between real world events and subject content.

The factor of convenience offered by the internet could be easily seen from the fact that learners can easily download written materials, audio and video communications. The costs needed are considerably less than buying print and audio-visual materials from publishers. Furthermore the resource materials can be selected and adjusted to suit the needs of the learners and allow the learners to study and learn at their own time and pace. This is what Teeler and Gray (2006, p. 36) claim as personalization. To this, Berge and Collins (1995) as cited in Graus (1999, p. 3), add that the use of the Internet “supports the shift from the traditional teacher-centered classroom to one in which the student is in the center”.

The next advantage offered by the internet is interactivity. The Internet allows students around the world to interact with one another cheaply, quickly and reliably as if they are communicating in real-life situations. In addition, many websites available on the Internet provide opportunities for learners to showcase and share their work, which has positive motivational effects and raises self-esteem. Humanistic and interpersonal approaches thus are developed.

The Internet has indeed become a part of every human being's life. It does not only play an important role in routine life, but also in education. It can motivate students to learn and enjoy their language learning. The small scale survey described in this paper then has been made to discover the extent to which the English Language Learning websites available on the Internet is being comprehended and used as a powerful learning environment by the students studying at a higher education institution. Based on the findings of the survey, some suggestions are then offered.

Methodology

This study was carried out in a private university in Surabaya on November – December 2010 to measure teachers' and undergraduate students' perception of the importance of using the Internet especially to learn English. Participants were 10 teachers and 100 students. Though the students studied in different departments, all students enrolled in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes and were in their second semester of their university study.

All of the students were administered a questionnaire containing 14 open-ended and closed questions. The questionnaire itself was divided into two major sections. The first section collected the students' demographic variables, namely gender, department, and batch. The second section of the questionnaire

measured the students' perceptions toward the use of the Internet. The survey questionnaires were administered for approximately ten minutes.

A focus group discussion (group interview) was carried out by inviting twenty students who were selected randomly. These students were interviewed to obtain a more detailed description of the students' perceptions. The interview questions were basically similar to the questions written on the questionnaires. The group interview took about thirty minutes.

A questionnaire was also distributed to 10 teachers who taught the EAP classes. Basically the questions were similar to the ones written on the students' questionnaire. 5 teachers were further interviewed to obtain deeper understanding. The group interview lasted for about thirty minutes.

All questionnaires were then analyzed. The details obtained from the semi-structured discussions served the purpose of yielding further details that were not included in the questionnaires. The findings of the survey conducted were then synthesized to formulate the teachers' and the students' perceptions of the use of the Internet to learn English.

Findings and Discussion

Students' Data

50% of the respondents said that they used the Internet between four to ten hours a week and 35% of the respondents between eleven and twenty hours a week. At the same time, 15% of the students reported that they accessed the Internet less than four hours per week. None of them reported that they did not use the Internet at all. It can be observed then that all of the respondents were regular users of the Internet.

The majority of the students (90%) said that the purpose of accessing the Internet was to search for information or entertainment (chatting and playing online games). Only 10% of the students stated that they used it for learning a certain subject or method. A student interviewed (S4) said, "I use the Internet to check my e-mail, chat with my friends, and play online computer games and search for information". Another interviewee (S12) also stated, "I usually chat with my friends, check my e-mail, and keep up-to-date news from my country or other countries". "Most of the time, I use the internet for doing my school work. I seldom use it for chatting or playing online games. Sometimes I use it for checking my e-mail and search for recent information", commented another interviewee (S18).

Though students' responses show low percentage in using the Internet for learning a subject or method, the present study revealed that the students actually have positive attitude towards the use of the Internet in their studies. All respondents agree with the importance of the Internet for their study. All of them stated that the Internet provided huge references that they can refer to when they do their school works. One interviewee (S1) added, "The Internet

has improved my paper work by speeding up my literature searches". Another interviewee (S3) said, "The Internet is important for my study. I usually access www.google.com to search information concerning my assignments".

When asked whether the Internet in general could help them to study and improve their English, all respondents said "yes". Most respondents (63%) pointed to the fact that most websites are written in English and, therefore, when they read such websites, they automatically practiced and improved their reading skill. Some respondents (26%) said that they learnt writing because they had to write emails in English. Others (11%) felt that they learnt and improved their listening and speaking skills because they liked to watch online movies and had online web-cam chats with their friends.

The interviewees also provided similar responses. An interviewee (S9) stated, "I learn English when I chat with my friends and read the information from the Internet. I gain many new vocabularies every time I access the Internet". Another respondent (S14) admitted, "I learn English a lot from the internet because everything on the websites is written in English". Similar response was expressed by S19, "I like watching online movies because they are up-to-date. It is difficult to get the Indonesian subtitles from such movies. So my listening skill has been improved a lot by watching those online English movies".

However, when asked whether they ever accessed any websites specifically for learning English, only 10% respondents said that they had ever tried that. Most respondents stated that never accessed such websites. There were various reasons expressed by these respondents: they did not have the information that there were some websites for learning English (1.4%), they did not have time to access such websites (2.3%) and they preferred to learn English with their teachers (5.3%).

The students interviewed expressed similar comments. An interviewee (S6) mentioned, "I do not have the Internet facility at my boarding place. Thus, I have to access the Internet at school. Well, my time is limited then. I prefer to use my time to check emails and do my assignments rather than studying English online. Besides, I can learn English in the classrooms". The other two students interviewed (S16 and S20) prefer to learn English with their teachers as well. S16 said, "I prefer to learn English in the classrooms. I prefer to learn it from my teacher than doing things by myself" while S20 said, "In learning English, I prefer face-to-face communication. I think it is better because I can practice using the language with my teacher. If I have questions, I can also ask my teacher immediately".

Those who had ever accessed the websites for learning English independently were further asked whether they found it useful or not. To this, eight of ten respondents (80%) replied that although they did try such websites, they felt that their language proficiency did not benefit. As an interviewee (S7)

said, "Once I tried to do some English online assignments. The Web provided answer key and total score, but I was still confused. In the end, I had to ask my friends or English teachers to help me identifying the mistakes that I had made. So, personally, I think it was not really useful". This might be the reason why the students were reluctant to learn the language by using the websites.

Only two respondents out of the ten students (20%) who had ever accessed websites for learning English felt that they gained more knowledge of the language. As an interviewee (S8) stated, "My English teacher did not provide many assignments. So, I searched for more online assignments on the Internet. Well, at least, by doing some online assignments, I can improve my reading and grammar skills". The low percentage of the students who believed that they gained more knowledge by learning through the websites designed for learning English may also indicate that the majority of the students still believed learning in the classroom and consulting their teachers were more beneficial for their education.

Furthermore, the great majority of the respondents (92%) also said that their teachers never suggested websites to them for their language learning. The interviewees apparently had additional opinion concerning this matter. An interviewee (S2) mentioned, "My English teacher never suggested me to access the websites for learning English. I guess she did not know any good websites". S1 assumed that her teacher never tried any English websites ("She never recommended any websites. Perhaps she herself never tried to access such websites").

It seems that all respondents have a positive perception towards the use of the Internet. They also have an opinion that the Internet can certainly help them to learn English. By doing their favorite activities (chatting, emailing, reading online news, etc), they learn to improve their English skills in indirect ways. Only few respondents had already accessed some websites designed for learning English. However, they felt that those websites did not provide them with any real benefits in improving their language proficiency. Websites specifically designed for English learners, thus, do not seem to be very popular among the respondents of this study.

The lack of the human factor or real interactivity might be the reason why the websites for learning English are not popular among the respondents. Therefore the respondents prefer to learn the language in the classroom because they can have communications with their teachers. They also prefer to learn English by having online chatting and emails with their friends or by reading the online information.

Some scholars might confirm this point of view. McGrath (2002, p. 129), for example, states that emails or instant messenger services permit real-time chat so that the users have genuine communication and they learn the language unconsciously. A study conducted by Felix (1997, pp. 8-9) showed

that 75.5% of 37 students wanted to regard the internet as a complement to classroom instruction not as a tutor. Interestingly, Brown and Liedholm (2004) also showed that the students' performance in an online class was lower compared to those in a classroom class that uses a variety of learning tools including the Internet.

Teachers' Data

All teachers are females, and 30% of them have been teaching for 1-5 years, 50% for 5-10 years, and 20% have been in service for more than 10 years. 30% of the respondents said that they used the Internet less than four hours a week. 40% of the respondents used it between 4-10 hours per week. The others (30%) used it between eleven and twenty hours a week. All teachers said that they used the internet to search for information especially for their teaching or check their emails. It seems that at all of the respondents were regular users of the Internet.

As regards possible advantages of using the Internet for helping them in language teaching, all teachers believed that accessing the Internet was beneficial. In particular, they thought that they might find up-to-date information on language teaching, background information about texts that they used in class, and articles on teaching methodology. A teacher (T1), for example, found "The Internet contains rich resource information and many interesting articles, and can provide supplementary material for classroom teaching". Another teacher (T2) added, "On the Internet there are many resources for each field of language, especially language teaching. I can grasp some ideas to explain to the students in a specific lesson".

The same total agreement was expressed about the benefits that the Internet can offer language learners. All teachers felt that access to the Internet gave plenty of opportunities for language exposure. Moreover, some teachers interviewed indicated that it might promote students' learning autonomy. As T3 said, "I agree. The use of internet can encourage the students' autonomy and improve their language skills".

However, when asked about EFL websites, none of the teachers said that they used such websites regularly although all teachers knew some EFL websites such as <http://www.english-to-go.com> and <http://www.englishclub.com>. The reasons for *not* using EFL websites regularly were because the teachers did not have enough time (40%) and because of their preference of traditional coursebooks/textbooks to materials from the Internet (60%). A teacher (T4), when interviewed, stated, "I sometimes access www.english-zone.com. I search for additional exercises. However, although the Internet contains rich information, I do not use it regularly. Why? Because I must use the activities from textbook provided. Well, I must follow university curriculum, right?". Another interviewee (T5) mentioned, "I do not use the

Internet as a resource for my classroom. I use the internet sometimes to find jokes, stories, or methodologies. I do not access the Internet regularly simply because I have no time”.

All teachers did not ask their students to access EFL websites though 40% of them had ever suggested the students to try the exercises provided on EFL websites. During the interview, two teachers (T1 and T5) provided their reasons. T1 said, “I think it is not necessary to ask our students to access certain EFL websites. I am sure that they already know that there are some websites that provide interactive language exercises”. T5 stated similar response, “I never suggest EFL websites for my students. But yes, sometimes, I ask the weak students to improve their proficiency, for example, by having self-access learning through websites”.

In short, the teachers involved in this small-scale study found that accessing the Internet was beneficial. However they did not really use it for language teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both students and teachers viewed the Internet as a potentially very useful resource for learning and teaching. The students felt that the Internet helped them improve their English because of the fact that most websites available are in English. In addition, their favorite online activities were chatting and emailing, through which they also practiced their language skills. The students thus agreed that the Internet helped them to promote their language proficiency, because each time they accessed the Internet they used English. They did not need to use websites specially designed for learning English.

The teachers also believed that the Internet offered very good opportunities for language learning and teaching. They, however, did not suggest EFL websites for their students, because they mainly accessed the Internet in order to search for information for their own teaching. A number of teachers were similarly skeptical, as they seemed to prefer traditional coursebooks/textbooks to materials available on the Internet.

In general, EFL websites were not very popular among students and teachers. It might be because the technology does not yet allow real human-to-human communication to take place. Students prefer to *use* English and look for true interaction. Chat-rooms, instant messaging, and email appeal to them more than specially designed websites precisely because of the opportunities for real communication.

Suggestions

Considering the advantages offered by the Internet and the findings of this study as described above, the present writer came to a conclusion that in

learning English, students still need interactions with their teachers and friends. The Internet, particularly the websites designed for learning English, might be taken into the classroom as one of learning instruments. It should not however be the only instrument used to improve the learners' language proficiency.

There are many strategies that can help students use the Internet more effectively in the language classrooms. Some of them are described below.

First, the teachers can ask the students to do research, for example: to find the differences between Simple Present Tense, Simple Past Tense and Simple Future Tense. The Internet offers many credible and expansive resources for students to use to do such research. There must be guideline for the students however when asking them to do online research. Elementary students especially should be given a small list that they can use for their research. Older students should also be taught how to effectively search the Internet on their own.

Second, the teachers can ask the students to do additional exercises. For students who are often finished early or have more advanced skills, the Internet can be an excellent way to supplement and extend upon their learning. There are also many websites on the Internet that offer remediation to help reinforce learning for those who need a little extra help.

Third, the students can be encouraged to have online friends. This is a very interesting activity for the students. By communicating with students in other parts of the country or world, they can expand their knowledge, improve their language proficiency and reinforce the art of letter writing.

Fourth, the teachers can setup online boards and ask their students to participate in the discussions. The topics covered can be proposed by the teachers or the students.

Another idea is by having classroom website. Teachers can post class schedule and assignments on a continuous basis. A lot of teachers also use their site to post student works and portfolios. The visitors can grade these works so that the students will be more motivated to do their best.

There are still other strategies that can be implemented in the language classrooms. The writer believes that when the right pedagogy is used, the use of the Internet in the classroom can surely open new possibilities for teaching and learning.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire for the Students

Part A:

- 1. Gender: Male Female
- 2. Department :
- 3. Batch :

Part B:

- 4. How often do you access the Internet?
 - Never 4 – 10 hours a week
 - Less than 4 hours a week 11 – 20 hours a week

- 5. For what purposes do you access the Internet?
 - Searching for information Playing online games
 - Chatting Learning a certain subject / method
 - Others: (please specify)

- 6. Do you find the Internet useful for your study?
 - Yes No

- 7. If you answered “Yes” for number 6, please specify how the Internet helps you in your study.

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- 8. Do you think accessing the Internet can help you to improve your English?
 - Yes No

- 9. If you answered “Yes” for number 8, please specify how the Internet helps you to improve your English.

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- 10. How often do you access the websites which are designed for learning English?
 - Regularly
 - Often, but not regularly
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never

- 11. If you answered “Never” for number 10, please specify your reasons.

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- 12. If you have ever accessed the websites which are designed for learning English, do you think that they can help you to improve your English?
 - Yes No

